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**COUNCIL FOR A BETTER LOUISIANA**

## **Voters Statewide Split on School Vouchers. . . Oppose Taking State Funds From Public Schools to Finance and Want Accountability for Schools that Participate**

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UNTIL: November 22, 2002**

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(Baton Rouge, LA) — Louisiana voters are divided on whether publicly-funded school vouchers should be used to help students, regardless of family income, attend private or parochial schools, but they appear willing to consider vouchers in some special cases.

Those are among the findings of a new statewide survey of voters by the Council for A Better Louisiana. This is the second report from a survey focusing on current issues in education. The first part was released last week. Generally the survey shows that voters are ambivalent about the use of school vouchers in Louisiana, and they want additional accountability if some sort of voucher system is put in place.

When asked their views on vouchers for students regardless of their family incomes, 45% of those surveyed favored the concept, compared with 46% who opposed it. Support grows, however, in certain special circumstances. Fifty-one percent of those surveyed say they would favor vouchers if they were used to help students in failing public schools attend a private or parochial school. A greater number, 58% favor using vouchers to assist students from low-income families compared to 36% who oppose it. Interestingly, there was little or no difference in the attitudes of whites and African-Americans.

Because school vouchers deal with state dollars CABL wanted to know what voters thought about financing a voucher program. Again, support for vouchers varied, depending on the scenario. Forty-four percent of voters statewide favor vouchers even if they cost the state more money, compared to 48% who oppose it. Only 32% indicate support if it means they would have to pay more taxes. Support drops off even further if vouchers would take money away from public schools. Just 26% of voters would support vouchers in that circumstance, versus 65% who would oppose them.

“Not only is there generally weak support for vouchers, it evaporates quickly if it means taking money away from public schools or if it costs taxpayers more money,” said Barry Erwin, President of CABL. “There is some feeling that poor kids or kids in failing public schools should have the opportunity to use a voucher to attend a private or parochial school, but even then citizens don’t appear willing to pay for it,” Erwin said.

This presents a difficult challenge to state policymakers who are looking at options for students who are currently enrolled in chronically failed public schools. All of these failed schools in Louisiana

have high percentages of students who live in poverty. A critical question is whether state government should pay for vouchers with money normally spent to send these same kids to public schools. Voters seem open to the concept of vouchers to assist these children, but balk at additional funding. This is an important public policy issue that should be further explored before voucher legislation is passed.

CABL was also interested in the notion of accountability when it comes to using publicly-funded vouchers to allow students to attend private or parochial schools. Under Louisiana's current school accountability plan, public school students must pass the state LEAP tests at the fourth and eighth grade levels to be promoted. In addition, public schools must report general information about how their students perform on standardized tests to help inform parents about their school's performance. There are no such requirements for private schools, though voters seem to strongly favor those concepts if state dollars are used for students at those schools.

Eighty-eight percent of those surveyed say private schools that accept vouchers should be required to report their average scores on standardized tests to help parents choose which schools they want their children to attend. Another 86% say private schools that accept vouchers should be required to have their students take the same tests that students in public schools are given to see if they are doing a good job. There was very little difference between whites and African-Americans in their support for these conditions for the use of vouchers in participating private schools.

“Voters are saying that if we do use school vouchers, even in limited circumstances, there needs to be an objective way to measure the academic performance of students who attend private schools with state dollars, as well as a way for the public to judge the overall performance of these schools,” Erwin said.

Finally, voters seem to feel that private schools that accept vouchers should open their doors to all students. Fifty-five percent of those surveyed said these schools should have to accept any student who applies, versus 35% who say schools should be allowed to accept voucher students based on grades, talents or other factors.

“Based on these findings, CABL believes policymakers and elected officials should carefully examine any proposals for using school vouchers, even as a tool for helping low income children in failing schools,” said Stephanie Desselle, CABL Senior Vice President. “Even though voters are split on the concept of vouchers, they clearly want accountability and they are reluctant to take steps that might harm state support for public schools.”

CABL believes that the focus on education reform and academic progress in Louisiana should include vigorous support of the school and district accountability system – its standards, tests and remediation. We must also work to move more of our children living in poverty into quality early childhood programs, continue to support reading initiatives for young students, retrain teachers where needed, reorganize failed schools and improve teacher preparation and quality.

*This survey was conducted for CABL by Ed Renwick of New Orleans. The statewide survey was conducted September 17-24, 2002 of 600 registered voters. It has a margin of error of +/- 4.1%. CABL is a nonprofit, nonpartisan statewide organization working on issues in the public interest. For more information contact Barry Erwin or Stephanie Desselle at (225) 344-2225.*

**2002 STATEWIDE**

**Citizens Survey on School Voucher Issues**

CONDUCTED BY ED RENWICK, NEW ORLEANS, LA SEPTEMBER 17-24, 2002

1. I would like to ask you some questions about school vouchers. As you may know, a voucher is another name for public money that the state might give to parents to help pay the cost of their children’s education in private or parochial schools. Would you favor or oppose...

<u>OPINION</u>	<u>FAVOR</u>			<u>OPPOSE</u>		
	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black
Vouchers for children no matter what their family income	45%	45%	45%	46%	45%	49%
Vouchers for low-income public school students to go to a private or parochial school.	58%	57%	59%	36%	36%	36%
Vouchers for students in poor performing or failed schools to go to a private or parochial school.	51%	51%	51%	40%	41%	38%

2. Would you favor or oppose school vouchers if they:

<u>OPINION</u>	<u>FAVOR</u>			<u>OPPOSE</u>		
	Total	White	Black	Total	White	Black
Cost the state more money	44%	44%	44%	48%	47%	51%
Would require citizens to pay more taxes.	32%	33%	29%	61%	59%	67%
Reduced the amount of money available for public schools.	26%	25%	27%	65%	65%	66%

Please tell me if you agree or disagree with the following statements:

3. **Private schools** that accept state vouchers should be **required to report their average scores on standardized tests** to help parents choose which schools they want their children to attend.

<u>OPINION</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>
AGREE	88%	87%	88%
DISAGREE	9%	8%	9%

4. If Louisiana had a voucher system in place, **private schools** that accept publicly funded vouchers should be **required to have their students take the same tests** that students in public schools are given to see if the schools are doing a good job.

<u>OPINION</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>
AGREE	86%	86%	85%
DISAGREE	12%	11%	14%

5. Do you think private schools that accept publicly funded vouchers...(can only choose one)

<u>OPINION</u>	<u>AGREE</u>		
	<u>Total</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>
Should be required to <b>accept all students</b> who apply, or	55%	51%	64%
Should be allowed to <b>choose which ones they accept</b> based on grades, talents or other factors?	35%	38%	29%

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Gender:	Male 46.1%	Female 53.9%	
Race:	White/Hispanic 70.8%	Black 29.2%	
Party:	Democrat 60.3%	Republican 21.7%	Independent 12.2%
	Don't Know/Refused 5.8%		
Education:	< than High School 13.5%	High School 34.6%	Some College 23.6%
	College Graduate 27.2%	Don't Know/Refused 1.2%	

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